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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how preservice teacher education program experiences and student life experiences related to positive changes in teacher candidates' attitudes toward student diversity. Five preservice teachers at the University of Utah completed interviews during their final term in the program. Each 45-minute interview discussed candidates' views on teaching diverse learners both prior to and at the end of their professional education program, focusing on program and personal variables that might account for attitude change. Researchers coded participant comments into several categories. Results indicated that participants believed they had no understanding of teaching diverse students upon program entrance, but their attitudes shifted markedly by the end of the program. Most had made a firm commitment to several multicultural education practices. Shared personal characteristics of belief changers included: an openness to learning and to new ideas; proactive behavior to learn about diversity; high empathy for minority students; and significant caring about social justice. Changers tended to seek out experiences with diverse cultures. They believed that a multiculturalism class they completed helped raise their awareness about diversity. Several believed that the field component was important in their learning about diversity. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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CHANGING TEACHER CANDIDATES' BELIEFS ABOUT DIVERSITY

by

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Introduction

In reviewing the literature of how teacher education programs are beginning to address the complex issues of multiculturalism, it is interesting to note that there are no hard and fast answers. Many colleges and universities are struggling with the dilemma of having teacher candidates who are generally white and middle class going into classrooms which have increasingly diverse student populations. The central question seems to be how to have the candidates progress from their own culture and limited experiences to that of making multiculturalism a more central focus in their teaching.

This is a difficult challenge because most teacher candidates have little exposure to diversity themselves (RATE, 1989), and their class and race can often mitigate against establishing productive relationships with minority students. From a constructivist perspective, such a lack of relevant prior knowledge impedes learning. Further, research on this point offers little guidance. Many teacher educators have assessed the impact of multicultural courses, and most often found little or none (see, e.g., McDiarmid, 1992). How then can teacher education programs improve their effectiveness in promoting positive multicultural dispositions and skills in their graduates? This question formed the focal point for this study. Specifically, we wanted to find out what we were doing that was actually working. Armed with this knowledge, we can design stronger programs The study was designed to uncover program and life experiences that were related to positive change in teacher candidates.

Background to the Study

What does teacher education do now to prepare beginners for multicultural classrooms and how effective is it? One of the common courses in many teacher education programs is a foundation course on multiculturalism. Morey and Kitano (1997) advocate a dual presence in programs. By this they mean that multiculturalism must be woven throughout the program, but also have a distinct and visible area of specialization. Many universities require a field component in which teacher candidates are exposed to a multicultural experience. Some teacher candidates plan, develop, and implement a multicultural unit during their student teaching placement.

Methods courses often serve as the point in teacher education programs where teacher candidates can explore diverse ways of teaching from many different cultural perspectives. Various methods for integrating children's literature, teaching specific content in a multicultural fashion, or conducting a "cultural plunge" are among the strategies presented. Panel presentations from community members offer another avenue for beginners to learn about cultural differences and their impact on learning and teaching.

Los Angeles Unified School District instituted what it termed Multicultural Week. McDiarmid (1992) explored this program during a four-year longitudinal study. During this week, stereotypes and cultural differences were explored. However, his study did not find any significant differences between the views of the teachers before this week and after the week. Thus, he concluded that Multicultural Week did not meet its own stated goals.

Ross and Smith (1992) studied six teacher candidates intensively over the course of a year. They found that the candidates needed encouragement to work with students

who were different from themselves. The resistance that Ross and Smith found was echoed in many studies reviewed here. It is often difficult for instructors to have white middle class teacher candidates understand the relevance of multiculturalism in their profession.

Artiles and McClafferty (1998) used pre- and post-concept maps and a beliefs survey to chart change in students' ideas about teaching multiculturally. They assessed the impact of a multicultural education course predicated on critical theory, sociocultural theory, and feminist theory, within a constructivist, reflective orientation. Course activities included readings, lectures, films, discussions, group investigations, case-study analyses, and laboratory activities. Two subgroups were identified based on the density scores in the concept maps. Group A crafted more differentiated maps before the course. However, they constructed less differentiated maps after the course. Group B exhibited the opposite pattern. At the end of the study, Group A emphasized a technical orientation to teaching. Issues that seemed to bring structure or certainty were highlighted in their conceptualization. Group B tended to be more concerned with social context issues, particularly after the multi cultural course. These students gave greater value to the potential role of teachers in promoting student learning.

Deering and Stanutz (1995) wondered how culturally sensitive preservice teachers were, and what effect a pre-student teaching field experience in a multicultural setting might have on their cultural sensitivity. All 16 preservice secondary teachers took the Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory prior to and following a ten week field. The field experience seemed to have no impact on the subjects in other areas and may have

even had a negative impact on a few. The authors speculated that only sustained experiences with minority students over time would have beneficial impact.

Research with practicing teachers is equally disheartening. Rhine (1995), for example, examined the effectiveness of an inservice workshop aimed at improving teaching practices for limited-English proficient students. Twenty elementary teachers from 4 major school districts in CA who taught 5th or 6th grade classes with a combination of LEP and fluent English-speaking students participated in this study. Each participant received inservice training regarding specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) and the teaching of LEP students. Teachers were videotaped working with LEP students. In an assessment example, the teachers revealed three results: the LEP students spoke fewer sentences than non-LEP students; non-LEP students used manipulatives more than LEP students; and teacher questioning showed bias against the LEP students. The workshop, then, did not alter the belief system or the instructional practices of participating teachers.

While such research might be useful in showing teacher educators what not to do, it has little utility for guiding decisions about what to do. We decided to rectify this gap by focusing on teacher candidates who did show growth in understanding and skill in multicultural teaching. We wondered what it was about these people, their life experiences, their mindset, and their program experiences, that led to these shifts. Before we turn to the details of the study, we next describe the aspects of the teacher education program at the University of Utah that relate to multicultural education issues and practices

Program Description

There are several components of the elementary teacher education program at the University of Utah that we hope will lead to increased understanding and skill in multicultural education. Early in their university experience, candidates are required to take an ethnic studies course which provides detailed information on a particular cultural group. Often these courses involve cultural experiences outside of class, such as powwows or religious services at a black church. Next students must take a multicultural education class. Often this course involves work in a school serving a highly diverse population or low-income students. Some optional pre-cohort courses involve service learning. The professional education sequence culminates in a year-long cohort experience in which teacher candidates take special methods classes together and conduct field work, including student teaching, in a specified set of professional development schools (PDS). Sometimes these PDSs have high minority or low-income populations, sometimes not. As in most teacher education programs, a problem-solving seminar accompanies the cohort year, and the learning needs of individual students are discussed and analyzed at length. Either before or after the cohort, teacher candidates take a class entitled School and Society in which the role of schools in reproducing social inequities is examined. This typically does not involve any field experience. Once in the cohort, many special methods instructors weave in information about teaching diverse students, for example, through teaching cooperative learning in a general methods class or service learning projects in social studies methods. Throughout their professional education, teacher candidates are asked to reflect on their readings, discussion, and field experiences in a variety of ways, such as journals and reflective essays.

Methodology

A qualitative design was employed to investigate teacher candidates' change in beliefs about teaching in diverse classrooms. The lead author interviewed five preservice elementary teachers at program exit regarding their views on diversity and how these views had changed over the course of their university years. Candidates were selected by nomination from cohort leaders, clinical instructors who work closely with candidates during their professional education. Cohort leaders selected participants based on their marked shift in knowledge, beliefs, and commitments about teaching diverse learners over the course of their professional preparation. The certification program is a year-long cohort experience involving both intensive methods coursework and field work, housed at the University of Utah, a Research 1 public university located in the mountain west. All participants were white, one was male. Their mean GPA was 3.7, and their mean age was 28, ranging from 22 to 34.

Interviews were conducted during participants' final term in the elementary teacher education program. The lead author conducted all interviews. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes, and each was audiotaped and transcribed. Questions explored candidates' views on teaching diverse learners both prior to and at the close of their professional education program. Particular attention was given to program and personal variables that might account for participants' change in understandings about teaching diverse learners and about the problem of inequality in American schools. Following each interview, the investigator wrote field notes about her impressions of the participant's views.

Each author read and analyzed all transcripts. We conducted two forms of analysis, one global and one detailed. First, researchers read each transcript, noted

overall trends and patterns, and shared impressions. This initial reading and discussion led to a tentative coding scheme. Next, one investigator read all of the interviews again, and identified idea units, phrases or sentences that together communicated a single idea. Related idea units were then grouped in categories using the initial coding scheme. The researchers periodically reviewed and refined the coding scheme until all idea units could be appropriately coded. As a final check, the authors selected a random sample of idea units, independently coded them, and discussed any disagreements until consensus was reached on the appropriate coding.

Findings

Participants' comments were coded into several categories in an effort to ascertain their entering and exiting beliefs, knowledge, and commitments about teaching diverse students, and to locate the personal and program variables that might account for any shifts. Following is a review of findings within each of the coding categories.

Entering beliefs, knowledge, commitments. Candidates reported unanimously that their understanding of teaching diverse students was virtually nil upon entrance to the university. They made comments such as the following:

- I didn't have any knowledge about minorities starting out.
- Before, I had no idea they learned or communicated differently.
- When I first started, my knowledge was low.
- Before, it was something that never entered my mind.

Candidates reported that they had never really thought about why minority and low-income students have achievement problems. If they did think about it, they believed that teachers had very little influence given students' economic backgrounds

Exiting beliefs, knowledge, commitments. We found a great deal of evidence that candidates' views shifted markedly. One said, "My ideas about why minorities struggle in school have changed a lot. Before I was really cold -- just go out and learn… I had stereotyped them. I have been very shallow. I will admit it freely on tape."

Participants also reported that prior to the cohort and other program experiences, they believed that low-income and minority parents didn't support their children's education; through the program, they realized that parents are actually very supportive. In some cases, what was different were expectations about what the family-school relationship should be. Tongan parents expected more separation of family and school functions than teachers expected, for example. Other parents, often Mexican American, were quite intimidated by the school. For the most part, however, what they originally perceived as lack of parental support, they came to realize, was the lack of time that many minority parents have available to participate in school activities. Several participants noted that minority and low-income parents often work several jobs for typically inflexible employers. Much of the family energy is devoted to basic economic survival, and not much is left over for parent-teacher conferences, volunteer work in school, reading to children each night, and so on.

Participants increased their understanding about the difficulty that ESL, minority, and low income students have in achieving school success. They offered several explanations for the achievement gap between minority and majority students:

- low-income and culturally diverse families don't understand how the system works.

- Cultural differences in communication and learning styles between the home and school; for example, differing norms for making eye contact could adversely affect teacher-student interaction.
- many minority cultures tend to think more day-to-day, rather than long term. This is not bad in itself; it's just different from what works in majority society.
- teacher bias and low teacher expectations
- students have a hard time fitting in, feeling like they belong, so they have to work harder not to be left out.
- families have different assumptions about the school-family relationship
- families have to focus their energy on economic problems and don't have enough time to devote to their children's education.
- language barriers.
- lack of sufficient family-school communication
- students' low self-esteem and low self-confidence
- parents themselves have had a bad or inadequate education so they are not equipped to assist their children with educational difficulties.

Interestingly, however, they did not presume to have attained perfect understanding of this complex issue. Several admitted honestly that they didn't fully understand.

Our respondents also had made very firm commitments to several multicultural education practices. For example, they disdained the fragmented, "Taco Tuesday" approach to instruction for diversity. They described their future classrooms as ones in which multicultural curriculum was infused throughout the year and in many subject areas, as welcoming places in which different opinions were valued and considered a

source of learning. They saw themselves using a variety of instructional practices, and spending a lot of time studying their students' cultural characteristics and getting to know their families. One plans to learn Spanish. A critical school role, they believed, was to teach minority parents how the system works. They all expressed commitment to the idea of each child as an individual, and of the need to know each one, culture and all, in order to best meet their educational needs. Another theme that emerged was their sense of themselves as still learning, as needing to study more, study children and culture more, and to seek help from others to advance their own learning. Here are some of their comments:

- When minority kids are in school, it should be a process of mutual adaptation.
- Teaching in a diverse school requires a lot more work. It is not changing the curriculum. It is getting out into the community, talking to the parents.
- Teachers should open their minds and say, we are all different, and let's see what we can do and do as much as we can to help.

Personal characteristics. Several patterns emerged about the personal characteristics of these belief changers. They shared an openness to learning and to new ideas. One commented that he had always tried to look at multiple perspectives, for instance. Another said, "I kind of had a real open mind towards everything so I sucked it all in." They were all proactive, self-starting learners, willing to take on extra work to further their own learning. For example, they took the initiative to seek out and participate in events from different cultures, like powwows. They studied culture independently through personal reading and in some cases, additional coursework in anthropology. One intentionally sought out a student teaching placement in a high

diversity school. This is not to say they found this work easy; on the contrary, several spoke of the difficulties they had in learning and of experiencing much anxiety. One woman said, "I really struggled at first, it was hard." They shared an interest in other cultures, expressing curiosity about Native American, Asian, and Oceanic cultures in particular. As a group, they exhibited a willingness to admit what they didn't know, that they needed to learn more; they were honest in their own self-appraisals. A few typical comments were:

- I try to really think about my own biases, to at least acknowledge them.
- I don't know all there is to know about school and society. I need to learn more.

We also noticed that these candidates were very high in empathy for minority students. Many said that it would be scary to be an immigrant or a minority student, that school would seem an alien place if a student was not white and middle class. They all said they believed that life for minority and low-income students was more difficult because of discrimination, societal barriers, and economic hardship. Just having to negotiate between two different cultures on a daily basis would be wearing. They thought the anti-bilingual education political climate would create a hostile environment for language-minority students, as would their perception that schools tended to dumb down the curriculum in ESL classrooms. One said, "If I were a minority, I would feel cheated. I would think they (whites) all have big heads. I would think that they think that everything they have done is the best that's ever been done."

These candidates were also highly emotional and expressed high degrees of caring about social justice. They were passionately committed to being excellent

teachers for all their students, and they were committed to working for social change. All expressed deep concern for the problem of inequality in schools and in society at large. Some representative comments follow:

- School is a big institution to change, but we've got to try.
- What power do I have to make a difference? You have to start small. I just hope that I can help.
- There are not enough open and welcoming white people out there.
- I have family members I am embarrassed to be related to; their opinions make me cringe.
- Politically I am just furious.

Life experiences. As we reported above, these candidates sought out many experiences with diverse cultures. They attended Native American powwows and services at African-American churches. They did volunteer work in low-income schools and took on service learning projects. These experiences affected their views about minorities. For example, one reported, "I went to all those Native American things and saw how much they are together as a group and how much love; they are not just drunks in the street". Another commonality was that several had studied a foreign language, some intensively, and they noted that this experience was a part of the reason they were able to relate to language-minority students.

In some way, most had had an experience as a minority themselves. One was the only male in the elementary teacher education cohort, another was the only female participant at an asphalt sales conference, another had lived in Lithuania for a time where she spoke Russian (Lithuanians don't like Russians), another had married and had a baby

at a young age and found many people looked down on her as a result. These five candidates came from primarily very white, middle class backgrounds, but could identify, albeit in a limited way, with the experience of being a minority.

In addition to seeking out personal characteristics, we wanted to find out what aspects of the university program contributed to participants' changing perspectives. Coding categories included classes, field experiences, and other.

Classes. The multicultural class was mentioned several times as being a good experience in raising awareness about diversity issues and in providing knowledge about cultural differences. Participants also alluded to good information that raised their awareness in the ethnic studies classes and in social studies methods. As a group, participants also had very positive attitudes toward their school and society classes, and noted that important discussions happened in that course. Typical comments included:

- The university requirements for multicultural education are strong and are a good thing.
- Taking classes at the U really helped me be aware.
- My ideas changed because I got an explanation of basic knowledge, for example, I didn't know about tracking.
- Taking the multicultural education class got me starting to think about multicultural education and issues.
- It was good to learn in the multicultural class about how to be sensitive to minorities' lives, backgrounds, beliefs.

Several mentioned that before the class, they hadn't understood basic cultural differences with such things as differing norms about eye contact.

Field. Several candidates reported that the field component was an important contribution to their learning about multicultural education and diverse learners. Several aspects of field experience were influential. One of course, was the opportunity to observe positive examples of multicultural education. Some candidates were able to observe what a welcoming school environment was like, what learning about students' culture meant, and what it took to develop close working relationships with families on a daily basis. One commented, "The cohort program opened my eyes and gave me the opportunity to work with minority students". And another noted, "Going to ... (a diverse school) forced me to think about it." Some felt very strongly that exposing teacher candidates to positive models of multicultural education was very important. One participant noted, "As far as the program goes, everyone should at least have that experience of being in a school like that." Interestingly, however, participants reported that negative examples also stood out for them as educative. For example, the disjointed approach to curriculum, as played out in one candidate's student teaching placement, convinced him that this approach was less than ideal.

There seems to be an interplay between field experiences and class work. Without having been sensitized to the issues through ethnic studies, social studies methods, and multicultural coursework, this prospective teacher wouldn't have noticed the inappropriate organization of the curriculum. Without the field experience, though, he wouldn't have been able to actually see the detrimental impact of the curriculum on real students. In another case, the student teacher learned about tracking in class, but didn't really appreciate its impact on students until she saw how her elementary school implemented a severe form of it and how it resulted in socioeconomic segregation from

the first grade on. One candidate summed it up this way: "seeing what is in one classroom and then coming back to the university and talking about it, finding out what's happening in other places" is what helped her learn.

Another aspects of field work reported as significant by candidates was the opportunity to get to know kids and their families as real people, not just statistics and stereotypes. One said, "Contrary to what I'd heard, parents were very involved and supportive." Another remarked, "I drove to Taylorsville every day and I saw this Mexican boy and his little sister walking like three miles and I know I can't stop and give them a ride but their life was a lot harder and they struggled financially." In another comment, a candidate said that in talking to parents at conferences "I thought, yeah, I have felt that way before". One woman noted:

> I learned about the experiences they had. I can sit in a class and somebody can tell me all about it and I can say, yeah, that's horrible. But to go there and have a second grader sit down and tell me how they have been in Mexico and New Mexico and their parents have a hard time finding work and can't speak English. Then also when the parents come into conferences and they are so intimidated because they don't speak very good English. It is like a whole different view of how it really works.

The field experience contributed to candidate learning in another way by providing opportunities for informal learning. Since in our program candidates are organized into cohorts and professional development schools for an entire academic year, they have the time to develop close working relationships with each other and with their cooperating teachers. These relationships opened up spaces for educative

conversations. One candidate commented that it wasn't so much books and readings that influenced her thinking as talking to her cooperating teacher and a very knowledgeable fellow teacher candidate. Another said that "talking to teachers in other districts has opened my eyes".

Other. In addition to course and field work, participants mentioned a few other factors that contributed to their learning. One's experience with service learning projects that involved work with minorities helped influence her thinking. Two described simply the university environment itself as influential. One noted that talking to personal friends helped her learn. For others, their own reflection was an important factor.

We also noticed that much time was required for these teacher candidates to shift their views. Recall that they were selected by cohort leaders based on how much their views had shifted during their cohort year. But also note that they all reported that the multicultural class, taken prior to the cohort, was an important element in their changed thinking. It appeared to us that learning this material takes a long time, and that the opportunity to read and discuss issues in class, in alternation with conducting various types of field experiences, all of which takes place over an extended time, was key to their learning.

Discussion

Several findings emerged from our examination of personal and program characteristics that contributed to graduates' changes in views about multicultural education. We highlight key findings below:

- Important personal characteristics of belief changers included openness to learning and new ideas, willingness to take initiative for learning, willingness to be honest

about their own strengths and weaknesses, interest in diversity, empathy, and high affect about social justice issues.

- Important life experiences included experiences with culturally diverse peoples, participation in volunteer work and service learning, studying foreign language, and having felt like a minority themselves at some time.
- Important aspects of coursework included learning basic knowledge about cultural differences, information about what happens to minority students in schools, and teaching practices that facilitate learning for at risk students.
- Important aspects of field work included the opportunity to observe both positive and negative examples of multicultural education, to get to know minority students and parents as human beings beyond the stereotypes, and to discuss issues and practices informally with knowledgeable peers and classroom teachers.
- It is important to thread multicultural education through a variety of field and course experiences over an extended time.

We make several recommendations for practice. First, regarding admissions, it appears that teacher educators should strive to select for admissions applicants who exhibit the following:

- Experience with diverse cultures
- An experience as a minority themselves in some way
- Independence and initiative in learning
- High empathy and interest in social justice
- Experience with studying another language

Our findings also underscore the importance of recruitment of minorities into teacher education. For all of our respondents, personal connections with people who had systematically different life experiences based on their culture, race, or language proved to be powerfully educative. It is no doubt impractical to populate all teacher education programs with such students. However, we found that peers who were knowledgeable could be a great influence. These knowledgeable candidates can serve to "seed" important ideas and dispositions about cultural diversity in their peers. Programs that can admit at least a portion of such outstanding students will be contributing to the learning of all their graduates.

Program experiences were also influential, and we have several suggestions about promising practices. Most importantly, a variety of experiences with different cultures and different schools over an extended period of time, coupled with multiple avenues for reflection, are critical practices. Many of our candidates exhibited quite low knowledge prior to coursework in multicultural education about cultural differences and their potentially deleterious impact on student learning. And even when they started the cohort, they still reported that they didn't know very much at all. However, they also reported that the information provided in classes was a very important piece of their learning. We suspect that the frequent reports of the lack of effects of multicultural classes results from the narrow time frame of most studies. The students in our study, had they been interviewed right after their multicultural class, would not have looked particularly outstanding. It took them at least two years of reading, discussing, working in schools, and revisiting the issues several times before they significantly shifted their views.

We also suggest that programs that successfully create opportunities for informal learning between candidates will more likely achieve their multicultural goals with their graduates. Mechanisms to accomplish this include instigating a cohort structure, concentrating field experiences in professional development schools, and hosting social events. All of these allow candidates to get to know each other over a sustained period of time, leading to more honest and richer discussions about important issues.

We speculate, too, that teacher educators may be able to use instruction to explicitly guide their primarily majority students to making connections between their own experiences and those of minorities. The candidates in our study spontaneously made those connections. But just as poor readers can be instructed in the comprehension strategies used by proficient readers, perhaps teacher candidates who don't spontaneously note connections between themselves and minority students can be instructed to do so. Drawing students' attention to what it was like to learn a foreign language, for example, or sharing about times they felt like a minority, could represent ways to extend learning about multicultural education. Related to this recommendation, we also suggest that teacher educators use instruction to build the capacity for empathy.

We make one major recommendation for research. This study was only exploratory, had a low n, and did not compare belief changers with those who did not change. Our findings are thus tentative and further descriptive, comparative, and experimental research is needed to verify our conclusions. For example, the average GPA of our respondents was quite high. Perhaps as a group they were just brighter, and were able to operate at a higher conceptual level than the typical student. Our own experience with these students leads us to doubt this alternative hypothesis, but

nevertheless, it warrants checking. We have been heartened, however, by our approach of seeking what's working and building from there. This study has given us fruitful ways to think about the relationship between our learners and the program experiences we design for them. We recommend it to you.

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